

“Something about the Bobolinks”
... and a Generosity of Spirit
by Kurt Meyer, President, Hamlin Garland Society

He was rather tall and distinguished, wearing a dark suit and tie. I was one of three presenters in our hourlong session, he one of 15 attendees, four of whom were related to me. He looked professorial and appeared to be both interested and receptive.

The setting was a hotel in downtown Boston, a four-day gathering of the American Literature Association (ALA), 1,200 people, primarily university professors, May 2005. Our session was hosted by the Hamlin Garland Society, one of several hundred author-affiliated groups constituting the ALA. I was seeking to explain that Hamlin Garland’s Iowa years – specifically, his Mitchell County years – were critically important to his development as an author, since he drew meaning and material from this period for the next six decades.

Having left a few minutes for questions, he asked me about Garland’s striving for balance, and cited *“something about the bobolinks... and a stream that bends around, despite all the bleakness.”** Yes! From the intro to “Main-Travelled Roads.” We savored a brief bonding moment.

He was Donald Pizer. His name is on the spine of five books shelved on our bookcase. Last month, Dr. Pizer died at age 94. He was a major player in a rather narrow field, a late 19th early 20th century American literary scholar. Among Pizer’s many accomplishments, he brought heightened understanding of Iowa author Hamlin Garland (... I hasten to add, also claimed by Wisconsin, South Dakota, Boston, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles).

Pizer approached me after the session and said something vaguely positive. (Was it *“Fine presentation,”*??? ... Perhaps, *“I enjoyed it.”* Or, *“Nice job.”*) We chatted for maybe a minute; all I recall now, almost two decades later, is his affirmation, expressed in an avuncular, encouraging manner. My observations about Garland’s boyhood received a thumbs-up from Don Pizer – cloud nine!

Obviously, efforts to assemble a meaningful Pizer tribute require more than recalling this scant interaction. Oh, I saw him a few times in subsequent years at ALA gatherings, but didn’t really engage. Accordingly, in preparing this remembrance, I reached out to three eminent Garland scholars for their thoughts:

“Donald Pizer was the first scholar to seriously research the works of Hamlin Garland. As a graduate student at UCLA, he selected Garland as the subject of his dissertation simply because the Garland archive was nearby (at USC), and no one had touched it. Throughout his life, Pizer expanded his research interests to other naturalists, continuing his work as a great scholar while mentoring younger academics, including me. Since he retired, he has been an inspiration to senior scholars as well, working actively and insightfully into his nineties. In the last few years, Jude Davies and I were fortunate to have collaborated with him on an update of the Dreiser bibliography.” --Roark Mulligan, Professor (retired), Christopher Newport University

“Donald Pizer was a giant in his field and influenced everyone who studies American realism and naturalism. His first book, ‘Hamlin Garland’s Early Work and Career’, remains essential reading and inaugurated a series of enlightening studies of the genesis of the writings of Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane, among others. He was also a kind and generous mentor, and I know I profited in many ways from his careful reading of the 800+ page manuscript of my biography, ‘Hamlin Garland, A Life’. That generosity of spirit carried over to the work of many emerging scholars who benefited from his counsel.” --Keith Newlin, Professor (retired), University of North Carolina Wilmington

“Donald Pizer was truly a giant in the field of American naturalism, not only for the theories that established the ways in which American naturalism had developed as a distinct entity from its French roots but also for his incisive studies of figures such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Hamlin Garland, John Dos Passos, and Edith Wharton. His readings were persuasive, logical, and illuminating, and when he disagreed with something, such as editing practices in the Virginia edition of Stephen Crane or certain theoretical readings of naturalist authors, those reading his clearly reasoned essays were left in no doubt as to the nature of the problematic text.

I was, and remained, in awe of him, of course, and did not meet him until after he had reviewed my first book manuscript for a press and had praised it. Whenever we met thereafter at ALA or naturalism conferences, his kindness, advice, and words of encouragement were something I treasured. At the 2007 naturalism conference in Newport, for example, I asked his advice about whether to pursue a shorter but more narrowly focused subject or a more comprehensive one on women writers of naturalism, and he unhesitatingly (and correctly) suggested the latter. He will be greatly missed, as a scholar, a mentor, and a kind human being.” Donna M. Campbell, Professor of English, Distinguished Faculty, College of Arts and Sciences, Washington State University

What comes through in these comments is that Don Pizer was not only a respected scholar, he was also a first-class individual, frequently demonstrating great “generosity of spirit,” as Keith Newlin noted. Knowing some readers will not be familiar with him, I’ve included an excerpt from his obituary**, below. And conclude with a paragraph from one of Pizer many books that includes a significant Garland focus:

*“... (from) an unpublished work by Hamlin Garland, written during 1886-87***, entitled ‘The Evolution of American Thought.’ At one point in this history of American literature, Garland wrote: ‘Nothing is stable, nothing absolute, all changes, all is relative. Poetry, painting, the drama, these too are always being modified or left behind by the changes in society from which they spring.’ This statement contains two of the main tenets of evolutionary criticism – that literature is a product of the society in which it is found; and that literature, like society, is therefore continually in flux. To this basic environmental relativism can be added the idea that change in both society and literature is slowly but inevitably progressive. ‘The golden age is here and now,’ Garland summed up, ‘and the future is a radiant promise of ineffable glory.’”* ...from *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Revised Edition, by Donald Pizer, 1984

*- *“The main-travelled road in the West (as everywhere) is hot and dusty in summer, and desolate and drear with mud in fall and spring, and in winter the winds sweep the snow across it; but it does sometimes*

cross a rich meadow where the songs of the larks and bobolinks and blackbirds are tangled. Follow it far enough, it may lead past a bend in the river where the water laughs eternally over its shallows. Mainly it is long and wearyful, and has a dull little town at one end and a home of toil at the other. Like the main-travelled road of life it is traversed by many classes of people, but the poor and the weary predominate.”
Introduction to “Main-Travelled Roads,” by Hamlin Garland, 1891

*** - Donald Pizer, a widely known and respected scholar of American literature and professor of English at Tulane University for more than 40 years, died on November 7, 2023 at the age of 94. He was born in New York City and raised in Brooklyn. He received his B.A. (1951), M.A. (1952), and Ph. D. (1955), all from U.C.L.A., and served in the US Army from 1955 to 1957. He then joined the English Department at Newcomb College, Tulane University, as an assistant professor.*

*Pizer concentrated for much of his career on late 19th and early 20th century American naturalism, a literary movement that included such figures as Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and John Dos Passos. (Notice someone missing from this list? Harrumph. --KM) He published many articles and over 40 books, both critical studies and editions, devoted to these writers individually and to the movement as a whole. His work played a leading role in shifting critical emphasis in interpreting American naturalism from its conventionally held position as a weak offshoot of French naturalism to being seen as a distinctly American phenomenon, with its roots in American experience and values. **He was widely regarded as the nation’s principal scholar of the movement and its writers.** (emphasis mine)*

At Tulane, he directed the Ph.D. dissertations of over 30 graduate students and in 1970 was appointed to the endowed Pierce Butler chair in English. He retired from teaching at Tulane in 2001 but continued his research and writing for many years.

**** - Written when Garland was in his mid-twenties, before his first book was published (1891), when his primary publisher was the *Boston Evening Transcript*, a newspaper that printed his book reviews and poems.*